

The Ostrogoth's Impact on The Byzantine Empire

HIST533

Submitted by Shaundra Paasch

M.A. Ancient and Classical History

The Byzantine Empire was continuously troubled by barbarian tribes, which impacted its development. From the vicious Hun invasions, to the Lombard migration, the empire's security and territory was in constantly in flux. The tribe that effected the empire the most, however, was the Ostrogoths. Led by Theodoric the Great, the Ostrogoths offered the empire much needed military troops and integrated thousands of people into Roman society. They further held fast in adopting Roman ways, including religious beliefs. They reclaimed Italy for the empire and offered a stability to the people that had not been seen in recent days. Theodoric demonstrated the resilience and leadership of the Ostrogoth people and their reluctance to fade into obscurity. They played a significant role in both the fall of the Roman Empire and in the ways that Byzantine Empire saw the barbarians.

The Ostrogoths, or eastern Goths, existed for some time without greatly interfering with the empire, except for the occasional skirmish or trade arrangement. Along with many other Germanic tribes, they teetered along the Danube and Rhine frontiers and never ventured much further into empire territory. In the 4th century, the Ostrogoths were attacked by the Huns, which drove them to seek refuge within the realm of the empire. Initial responses from the people were that of distaste because they viewed them as uncivilized and barbaric, but in 384, Emperor Theodosius granted them land and legal status, similar to that of other allies. They were also permitted to fight in the military, providing the empire with much needed troops against more

savage nations. The impact of this move cannot be overstated since military leaders constantly struggled with the onslaught of barbarian invasions and had to change tactics accordingly.

Whether they came up against Goths, Persians or others foes, it was helpful to know exactly who they were fighting and the tactics used against them. Fighting mainly on horseback, the Ostrogoths challenged the new Romans to adapt their fighting strategy by using horse archers and lancers.¹ This would be of use later in fighting the Ostrogoths and other enemies that used similar tactics, as it was better to understand an enemy before engaging them.

Ultimately, as barbarian tribes managed to increase their political validity, and assumed a more important role in society, perceptions of barbarians changed.² Many studies suggest that, “rather than intentionally creating a new sense of identity, barbarian settlers assimilated Roman cultural constructs” already in place, in order to better integrate.³ They became, for the most part, a legitimate part of the empire. They assimilated themselves into Roman society and relinquished much of their past practices. For example, rather than adhere to the religious beliefs of their forefathers, they adopted the religion of the Empire, Christianity. They also adapted similar ideals of law and sought to secure favorable positions in the government. But the most significant impact came in the form of Ostrogoth prince, Theodoric the Great.

Theodoric was raised in the heart of the empire itself, having been sent to Constantinople as a treaty agreement by Emperor Leo and Theodoric’s brothers. He grew up, not only being educated in the Roman ways, but saw firsthand, the treatment of barbarian people. He continued

¹ Livermore, Harold. *Twilight of the Goths: The Kingdom of Toledo, c. 565-711*. Bristol, GBR: Intellect Ltd., 2006. P.18 <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/apus/Doc?id=10146722&ppg=19>

² Mathisen, Ralph W. (Editor); Shanzer, Danuta R. (Editor). *Romans, Barbarians, and the Transformation of the Roman World : Cultural Interaction and the Creation of Identity in Late Antiquity*. Farnham, Surrey, GBR: Ashgate Publishing Group, 2011. p 24

³ Ibid

throughout his youth, to loudly express his disloyalty, ingratitude, and avarice for his captors, “which could be only excused by the hard necessity of his situation”.⁴ Later, Theodoric returned to his homeland with a singular vision, to lead his people into the luscious land of the Byzantine Empire and secure better lives for them. He made his way to the Italian peninsula with 250,000 men, women, and children, in order to reestablish the Ostrogoth kingdom. The reigning emperor, Zeno, supported Theodoric in this venture because he was tired of paying tribute to the Ostrogoths and also wanted to reclaim Italy from the self-proclaimed king, Odoacer. This was in ideal situation for the empire. If Theodoric lost, than the Ostrogoth people would once again be thrown into obscurity, but if they won, the empire would reclaim Italy along with the center of their religious office. As it was, Theodoric was honored for his success in the defeat of Odoacer.

Theodoric’s impact on the Byzantine Empire can be seen, not only in his success in reclaiming Italy, but with the Ostrogoths migration. He gave one-third of the land in Italy to his followers, most of which further adopted Roman ways and having fully integrated into Roman society, retained the land after the overthrow of the Ostrogoths.⁵ Foremost, Theodoric did not reshape Italy into a Gothic territory, but rather instilled the same political institutions framed by Constantine and other great Roman leaders. The Ostrogoth people adopted the Arian form of Christianity and continued to practice and impart it on others, thus spreading its teachings. It also came to pass that Theodoric assumed supremacy of the church and sought to restore religious values, neglected by previous western rulers. Proud of his Gothic nationality, Theodoric also believed that it was possible to reconcile Roman and Germanic interests by simply working together, for common goals. Above all, Theodoric proved to the Roman world exactly what

⁴ Gibbon, Edward. *Decline and fall of the Roman Empire Volume IV*. London, GBR: Electric Book Company, 1788. p.xx. <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/apus/Doc?id=2001727&ppg=33>

⁵ Ibis xxii

barbarians were capable of, both in the form of their leadership ability and their dedication to their ideals. In the words of Edward Gibbon, “Theodoric represents the rare and meritorious example of a Barbarian”.⁶

Though Italian stability was a relatively short-lived state, the Ostrogoths played a major role in political events of the last decades of the Roman Empire. Gothic sovereignty was hence established from Sicily to the Danube and from Belgrade to the Atlantic Ocean. The Greeks further admit that Theodoric was the ruler of this portion of the Western empire.⁷ During his reign, relative peace existed in Italy, literature once again flourished and the Arian form of the Christian religion thrived. After his death, instability of the area caused emperor Justinian to declare war on all Ostrogoths. He felt that they were gaining too much power and impressed too much of their cultural beliefs on the Roman standard.

There is no doubt that integration of different cultures can change the dynamics of a society. The mass migration in the 4th century presented the empire with willing Ostrogoth forces, to be used, not only as a training tool for the military, but to fight the empire’s enemies. In desiring a new homeland for his people, Theodoric the Great led them to Italy and claimed it as the new Ostrogoth kingdom, bringing with him some 250,000 kinsmen. He impressed on the people, the old ways of the empire and the Arian form of the Christian religion also gained strength. There is a statue of Theodoric located in Innsbruck Austria which demonstrates just how deeply Theodoric impressed on the minds of the Byzantine Empire.⁸ Had it not been for

⁶ Ibid 33

⁷ Ibid

⁸ <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/20063/20063-h/20063-h.htm>

Emperor Justinian's religious zeal in wanting to wipe out unorthodox Christians, the Ostrogoth kingdom may have endured.

WORKS CITED

Gibbon, Edward. *Decline and fall of the Roman Empire Volume IV*. London, GBR: Electric Book Company, 1788. <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/apus/Doc?id=2001727&ppg=33>

Livermore, Harold. *Twilight of the Goths: The Kingdom of Toledo, c. 565-711*. Bristol, GBR: Intellect Ltd., 2006. <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/apus/Doc?id=10146722&ppg=19>

Mathisen, Ralph W. (Editor); Shanzer, Danuta R. (Editor). *Romans, Barbarians, and the Transformation of the Roman World: Cultural Interaction and the Creation of Identity in Late Antiquity*. Farnham, Surrey, GBR: Ashgate Publishing Group, 2011.
<http://site.ebrary.com/lib/apus/Doc?id=10444463&ppg=24>

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/20063/20063-h/20063-h.htm>